



New Member Orientation Survey Results

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Legislative Effectiveness Committee

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New Member Orientation

Legislating is tough work and there is little time for new members to adjust to their new responsibilities. Being a state legislator means having to make tough decisions on spending and policy, and dealing with constituent problems. Although a person's business or professional life and previous political experience provide a helpful start, state legislatures use new member orientation and other training to help legislators prepare for their difficult new duties.

New member orientation is getting a makeover. Although it has been fairly common practice to orient new legislators to their duties, state legislatures are taking it more seriously and are modifying training based on feedback and surveys, understanding of adult learning styles and the new needs in today's legislature. States are beginning their planning earlier each time, trying to make the training "hands on" and practical, recognizing the key role technology has to play in the legislative process, and covering topics like ethics and sexual harassment that may not have been included ten years ago. New legislators will not have the opportunity to ease into their duties -- they will need to be effective right from the start and new member orientation has to help them meet those expectations.

The Legislative Effectiveness Committee of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) decided in 2001 to survey state legislatures to learn more about these important new member orientation and legislator training programs. Seventy-four of the 99 state legislative bodies and the Puerto Rico House of Representatives responded with detailed information about the topics, method, duration and faculty used in their programs. They also provided tips and guidelines for their colleagues. This document provides an overview of the results, a series of tables showing state responses and a list of key contacts for new member orientation.

Planning

Planning for new member orientation is often a joint venture involving the House or Senate Chief Clerk or Secretary, one or more legislative agencies and legislative leadership (see Table 1). States tend to find that planning needs to start early, that a variety of viewpoints are needed in the planning process, and that the backing of leadership for training is critical. In addition to these three traditional sources of planning, states such as Alabama, North Carolina and Texas receive help from their higher educational institutions.

Duration

Most state legislatures provide a new member orientation that is in the one day to 2.5 days range, finding that is the right balance between imparting key information and respecting legislators' busy schedules (see Table 2a). California, Colorado and the Florida House have greatly increased the time spent on the orientation, finding it a valuable experience. They are also breaking the training into phases of two or three days so that legislators have time to think and reflect on what they've learned in a previous phase. This approach provides training in manageable "chunks" rather than overwhelming the participants with too much information at once. Missouri includes a two-week road trip to visit state facilities and programs in addition to a five-day orientation.

Reimbursements

State legislatures most commonly provide a mileage reimbursement for new legislators attending orientation (see Table 2b). More than half the respondents report that participating legislators are paid salary or a per diem. Some states provide for expenses under a voucher system, with only a handful of states using unvouchered expense reimbursements.

Training Tools

One of the biggest changes in new member orientation concerns how the training is provided (see Table 3). Traditional methods of presentations and panels are still highly popular, but states are using mock floor sessions and committee sessions to give new legislators some "hands on" training. Presentations are often made with PowerPoint to enhance participant's understanding. States are also supplementing the training with handbooks, audiotapes and videotapes to help legislators educate themselves at their own pace and convenience. A few states are including case studies and mock media sessions in their training.

Faculty

States tend to rely on current legislators and legislative staff to provide the training for new member orientation (see Table 4). In addition, many states also include lobbyists, state agency officials and staff, and former legislators as part of their faculty. A few states also include university faculty, NCSL staff and other outside consultants, trainers and facilitators.

Substantive Issues

States vary greatly on the types of substantive issues they include in new member orientation (see Table 5). Some bodies, such as the Florida House, place a great emphasis on learning about substantive issues, while states on the other end of the spectrum figure legislators will learn these issues largely through the committee process and "on the job" training. Most of the states provide some training around ethics and conflict of interest laws and policies. Many states provide overviews of their taxes and tax policy, education system, health and welfare programs, environmental policy and judiciary. An increasing number of states are also covering their sexual harassment policies.

Procedural Topics

Understanding the legislative process has been the cornerstone piece of new member orientations, and it continues to be a critical topic (see Table 6). The orientation almost always covers the bill enactment process, legislative rules (parliamentary procedure), the role of staff, the committee system and administrative details such as expense reimbursement. States often include the budget process, media relations, constituent service, state government organization and the role of party caucuses.

Technology Issues

As legislatures become increasingly reliant upon technology, more states are making technology training a part of new member orientation (see Table 7). Legislators typically learn how to use their laptops or other computers, what the rules are regarding legislative technology, the particulars about the legislature's web site and how to use the legislative e-mail system. A handful of states provide assistance in creating a legislator's personal web site. Many states indicated that their technology issues are really handled by some group orientation and training, followed by individually-focused assistance and training.

Continuing Education

Some states are developing continuing education sessions as a follow-up to new member orientation (see Table 8). While less than half of the respondents use continuing education programs, it is on the rise. Typical topics are computer training, budget process, parliamentary procedure, sexual harassment policies and emerging policy issues.

Advice

The staff and members who plan new member orientation have strong opinions about what leads to a successful program. They emphasize:

- plan well ahead.
- get ownership by leadership.
- don't overwhelm the participants.
- focus on the essentials.
- make it "hands on".
- give the participants time to get to know each other.
- be flexible and make necessary on the spot adjustments.
- provide training in segments that allow time for reflection.
- custom fit your computer training for a wide ability range.
- give the participants materials that allow them to continue learning.
- get feedback and adjust future programs based on the feedback.